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Citing High Personnel Costs, Murtha Says Increases in End Strength Will 'Have to Come Down'

By Marjorie Censer,  
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The chairman of the powerful House Appropriations defense subcommittee said today that any increase in the Army's end strength would be temporary because "personnel costs are eating us alive."

Rep. John Murtha (D-PA) told reporters over breakfast in Washington that he plans to fund an increase in Army forces "for a couple years, and then it's going to have to come down."

The House Armed Services Committee in its version of the fiscal year 2010 defense authorization bill calls for a 30,000 increase in active-duty end strength for the Army in FY-11 and FY-12, and Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT), chairman of the Senate Armed Services airland subcommittee, has said he plans a "serious effort" to increase the service's end strength by 30,000.

But Murtha quipped today that "you can't spend an authorization number."

He said he supports providing funds for additional end strength for no more than two years. Then, Murtha told reporters, the numbers will have to be reduced.

"The only place we can really reduce money is in . . . the number of people because that's all outlays, and . . . a great percentage of our budget is personnel costs," he said. "So, I think two years is the limit."

At that point, Murtha continued, he expects stop-loss to have ended and dwell time to have significantly grown.

"Dwell time is the key, and I think as we see the troops coming home from Iraq, the dwell time will increase," he said. "And I think we'll be able to reduce the number of troops."

Earlier this month, Army Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Chiarelli told lawmakers that there "may be a requirement for us to have a temporary authorization of additional soldiers to fill some of the holes we have in our formations and to take the stress off the force in what is going to be a critical 12- to 18-month period."

But Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey has been clear that his service does not need more than a temporary increase.

Speaking to reporters after a hearing last month, he said permanent growth would be too costly.

"It comes down to it's about a billion dollars to have that increase, and that's a lot of money," Casey said at the time.

At today's breakfast, Murtha said Casey has asked for one to two years of additional funding, and he supports the chief's request.

At the same event, Murtha reiterated his support for a draft, arguing that the country "cannot afford to sustain a volunteer Army for a long time."

Yet, he acknowledged that a draft lacks public support and is "not an option."